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SUBJECT: CHAD: RESPONSE TO DEMARCHE ON DISTRACTED DRIVING

REF: STATE 6703

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¶1. (SBU) Embassy staff met January 27 with the staff of the Director General of the Chadian National Police (which has highway patrol among other functions) to deliver reftel demarche on the dangers of distracted driving. Local driving conditions are the subject of frequent exchanges among the diplomatic community in Chad and with Chadian officials, as recent road-paving efforts have been accompanied by increased speeding, and driving here has become more hazardous than in the past.

¶2. (SBU) Our Chadian National Police contacts told us that there are as yet no laws concerning texting or cell-phone use while operating motor vehicles in Chad. Cell phone companies began operations here within the past four years, and although cell phones have become popular as a mode of communication in cities, coverage does not extend outside larger towns.

¶3. (SBU) Late in 2009, concerned about the increase in accidents in N'Djamena as drivers sped up on newly-paved roads, the Director of National Police put out a public warning via the national radio network drawing attention to the dangers of cell phone use, both texting and telephoning, while driving. The National Police view cell phone use by motorcyclists in the capital as particularly dangerous. They told us that the accident rate in N'Djamena had definitely increased in 2009 over 2008, and that some of this increase seemed to be attributable to phoning/texting while at the wheel. No data are available on cell phone use in Chad, or on the number of annual traffic fatalities or their causes. Embassy staff have observed public notices on government-controlled billboards at major intersections in N'Djamena bearing pictures of cellphones inside red circles with lines through them, attesting to further GoC efforts at discouraging cell phone use while driving in this nation with a low literacy rate and reliance on public campaigns to exhort citizens to change behavior.

¶4. (SBU) The National Police took the opportunity of our visit to point out the variety of pressing concerns on road safety that they are trying to address, a few of them successfully. They noted that with only a tiny fraction of Chad's roads as yet paved, almost none marked with lane divisions or indications of where the road ends and berm begins, some major roads prone to disappearing in dust storms and others to turning into lakes during the rainy season, and almost none marked with lights, driving is a challenge in Chad under the best conditions.

¶5. (SBU) Many roads in Chad are so deeply pot-holed, or

function so much like sand-traps, that they are suitable only for travel via camel, horse or donkey. There are few police on public thoroughfares except in large towns, few hospitals to which to take accident victims, no real ability outside the capital to enforce existing driver's license or vehicle maintenance laws, and little formal driver's training. Driver's licenses can be obtained in many locations through bribery. Regulations on how vehicles may be used are spotty: it is not against the law to pilot a motorcycle with four riders, or to carry a 50-gallon drum filled with gasoline on the back of a motorcycle and a live goat on the handlebars. Transport vehicles are often overloaded to the point where they collapse under their cargo, and passenger vehicles designed for eight routinely carry 20 inside and one or more hanging out the open doors. Recent laws ban carrying more than 20 passengers in the open back of pick-up or transport trucks unless seats and an overhead cover are installed. The 1980-era Peugeots that serve as taxis in N'Djamena are known euphemistically as "neuf morts," as they are assumed to kill an average of nine people when they crash. Chad recently followed Cameroon in passing motorcycle helmet laws, but many of those who possess helmets carry rather than wear them when they ride.

16. (SBU) According to the Chadian National Police, the major causes of road accidents in the nation are vehicles striking cattle, sheep or goats crossing roads; drivers driving at night with no lights; drivers driving without functional brakes; drivers who lose control of their vehicles when hitting potholes or sand dunes, or when encountering obstacles in the road (such as collapsed transport trucks); and drivers driving upwards of 16 hours straight in challenging conditions without stopping. In N'Djamena, drunk driving, particularly of motorcycles, is a major cause of fatalities. Although the National Police share general

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elation at road-paving in the capital and on north-south axes between major towns, they point out that the same variety of traffic travels roads where vehicles can run at high speeds as traveled former dirt tracks: pedestrians of all ages; animals moving singly and in herds; animal-drawn carts and caravans; riders on camels, donkeys and horses; bicyclists; motorcyclists, and drivers of cars, trucks and military vehicles.

17. (SBU) The National Police also note that since former dirt roads were located quite near villages and residences, simply paving them where they lie creates highways in direct proximity to living quarters. In order to limit the number of child fatalities on newly-paved roads passing near residences, speed bumps are being constructed at the entrances and exits of villages, and to the extent possible, solar-powered traffic signals are being installed within cities and towns. N'Djamena got its first traffic lights within recent memory in September 2009.

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